

Tube Corn

Television Reviews by Wendy Bradley

If I were Keith Szarabajka I'd get a new agent.

No, I know you think you've never heard of him but you'd recognize him if you saw him. He was Edward Woodward's sidekick in *The Equalizer* for one thing. It was one of those unrewarding sidekick roles, you know, the younger, fitter but less famous helper of an older, porkier but much more famous protagonist; the kind of role where you have to spend an entire episode crashing around in the duct-work trying to break in to rescue your boss only to turn into comic relief when he rescues himself five seconds earlier and then berates you for your lateness. A role, in fact, rather like that good looking Hispanic guy had in *T.J. Hooker*, where you do all the leg-work and then get shot in the shoulder just before William Shatner gets to do the actual grandstand hero stuff.

How nice then, I thought when I saw the listings, for Keith Szarabajka to get a starring role for himself, even if it is only in a mini-series. And then I watched **Stephen King's Golden Years** and my goodness! Not only did he not play the hero, not only did he not even get his usual sidekick role, but to add insult to injury he was reduced to playing a mere McGuffin. Yes, that was Szarabajka, buried under a pound and a half of latex wrinkles and pursued across America by the psychopaths trying to take him away from the perky Girl-from-Uncle type who was trying to keep him out of the grips of the Evil Scientist who wanted to Do Experiments on him. When you open your script and find you don't even get a line for twelve and a half pages you must begin to ask yourself whether a "starring..." credit is enough. I hope he at least got serious money.

I confess I didn't join this series until episode three but I was immediately hooked by the quirky humour glued in between the gung-ho stuff, as though we were watching "The A-Team Go to Twin Peaks." Stephen King himself gave a cameo performance as the grumpy bus driver, but the real joy was the evil scientist trying to get another eighteen inches of cable out of the jobsworths in supplies. Never argue with Stores: they first sent him the wrong kind of connector but then, because he had snatched that one out of the storeman's hands without signing the requisition in umptiplicate, they made him sign page after page after page after page to get another. Then there was the blind daughter who had "connections" with the "underground" – a house full of leftover hippies, where the good guys could hide out for a while, confident that there would be a handy storm drain through which they could make their getaway while the hippies tried to fend off the psychopaths by standing in a circle chanting "om."

The plot, however, was something else. I mean, maybe it was just me, maybe they explained everything in episode one, but I could never get the hang of just what exactly was happening. Szarabajka, covering in wrinkles and a syrup to look seventy-something, was the janitor who got blown up in the explosion in the lab and got the fallout from the mysterious experiment. Instead of developing the statutory superpowers, however, he simply started to peel off the face furniture and get younger. He, his wife and the Girl from Uncle then fled for four episodes from the Psychopath – you could pick him out from the black gloves and the sinister way he kept toying with a garotte in the

title sequence – who wanted to hand him back to the mad scientist. However, as a passing truck driver remarked, "this guy's full of green light!"

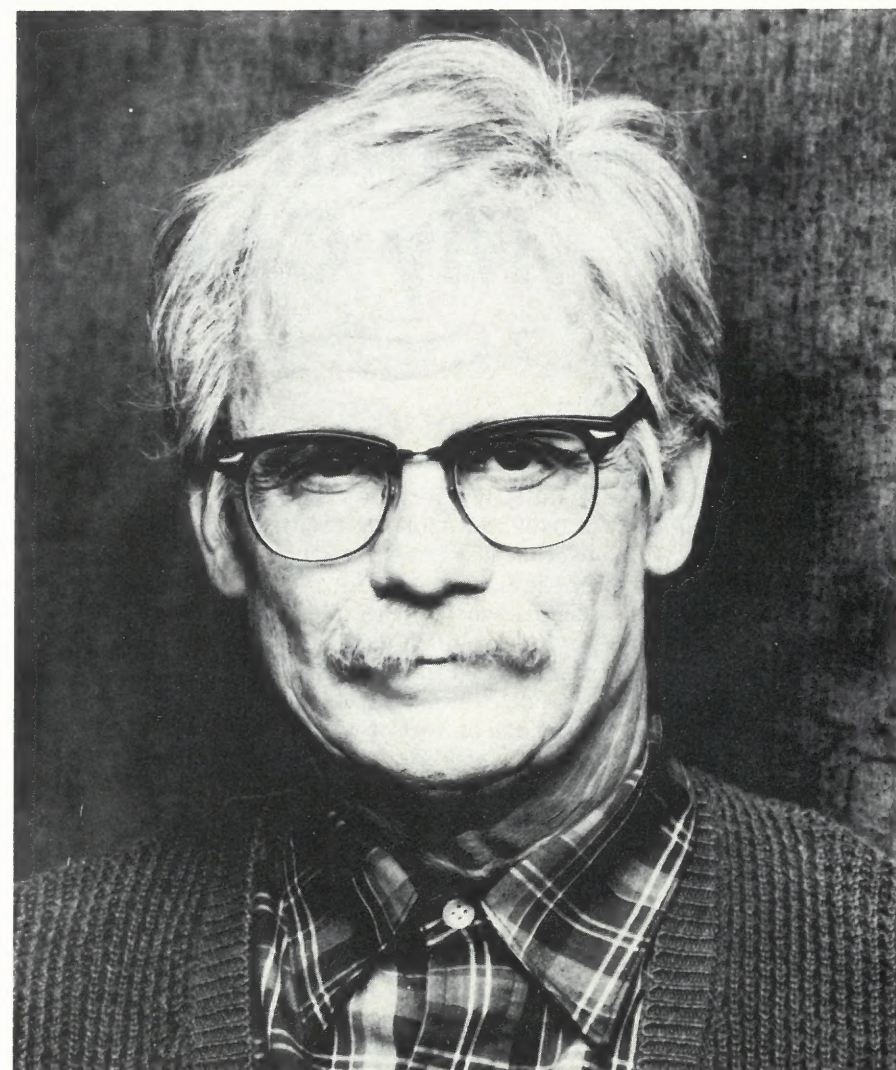
Indeed, as he was hitching across America Szarabajka developed a disconcerting habit of rolling up his eyes and going green, which together with a propensity for starting small earthquakes and making the sun go backwards in the sky would serve, one felt, to make him a trifle conspicuous. But no, after earthquaking and green-lighting all over the place we would simply cut to the next scene and he would reappear without the special effects the next time he was needed. Personally if I ever find myself in an explosion in a secret laboratory I shall begin sewing the superhero costume before the dust has settled but, no, all they seemed to want to do here was be inconspicuous and live happily ever after. How could a person not even try leaping tall buildings with a single bound given the opportunity? Ah, well. In the end he simply vanished in a puff of green smoke, taking his spouse with him to, well, neverneverland one assumes.

However at least **Stephen King's Golden Years** was designed for an adult audience, and had had some money spent on it, as well as intelligence and wit. In contrast, some areas of the country are getting **Hard Time on Planet Earth**, another American import, in which another sidekick specialist – Martin Kove, the musclebound sexist from *Cagney and Lacey* (and, incidentally, the leader of the Cobrai Kai dojo in *Karate Kid* where his star pupil was played by the actor who played Edward Woodward's son in *The Equalizer* – see how all this stuff fits together? Oh, all right, suit

yourself) – plays an alien. Not just any alien. No, a rampaging warrior alien who looks like Alien with a nose job and who is sentenced to live on Earth in the guise of a human until he has learned, er, stuff, or the ratings drop too low.

So we began with a straightforward steal of the landing scene from *Terminator* and then we moved on through the *E.T.* episode, the *Terminator* episode, the *Brother from Another Planet* episode and the just-about-any recentish sci-fi movie you care to name episode. The intelligence of the audience is not assumed to be high. We are not assumed to be capable of recognizing any of these references, nor of remembering the plot from one episode to another, and we are expected to find all the *faux-naif* "tell me about the war of the sexes" stuff funny. I thought the States were going through a television science-fiction renaissance at the moment, with good, average and marginal stuff fighting it out for network time. Well, will someone please go over there and buy up the good stuff? Preferably someone who can recognize the good stuff when they fall over it, and who, when they step into something like *Hard Time on Planet Earth*, has the wit to wipe it off their shoe?

(Wendy Bradley)



Keith Szarabajka in 'Stephen King's Golden Years'

FOR SALE

Interzone: The 2nd Anthology. Paperback edition, New English Library, 1988. Stories by J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Garry Kilworth, Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, Rachel Pollack, John Shirley & Bruce Sterling, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson and others – fine tales which the *Times* described as having "the quality of going right to the edge of ideas which can chill as well as warm." It's now officially out of print, but we have obtained some remainder copies for resale to *IZ* readers at just over half the original cover price – **£1.75** (including postage & packing; £2.75 overseas; \$5 USA).

Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare. A monograph by David Pringle, Borgo Press, 1979. Covers all Ballard's work from "The Violent Noon" in 1951 up to the eve of publication of *The Unlimited Dream Company* in 1979. Still in print in the USA but long hard to obtain in Britain. Now copies are available from *Interzone* at **£3.50** each (including postage & packing; £4.50 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

For either or both of these items please send a cheque or postal order for the appropriate amount to: *Interzone*, 217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. You may also pay by Access (MasterCard) or Visa card: please send us your card-holder's name, address, card expiry date and signature.